

Cue the hues for thousands of visitors

By Rosemary McClure
Los Angeles Times

BOSTON — Two pumpkins and a jolly scarecrow decorated the front porch of the house, a white clapboard Colonial in Farmington, Maine. A sugar maple tree in the frontyard had started to lose its leaves, and two boys were turning somersaults underneath it into a pile of scarlet and gold, a Dalmatian puppy yapping noisily as it tried to join in the fun.

A scene from a Norman Rockwell painting? No, a scene from a bus window as it rolled through town on a weeklong Trafalgar tour called Autumn Colors.

Several million people descend upon the rural back roads of New England every year in search of fall. They find it in small towns like Farmington, on shady trails through New York's Adirondack and New Hampshire's White mountains, along Maine's rugged coastline and in farming communities in Vermont and New Hampshire. They find it in a reflection of brilliantly colored trees in a quiet pond, in the scent of apples in an orchard, in a momentary glance at boys rolling in a hill of leaves.

I had joined the Trafalgar group to sample one of the company's tours, traveling anonymously as a consumer scout on an itinerary that covered 1,340 miles, from Boston to Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York and back to Massachusetts. Trafalgar, which calls itself "the world's favorite tour company," is one of the world's largest, moving about 90,000 travelers each year. Its rates are moderate — my trip cost \$1,535 per person, double occupancy, including most meals (air fare was an extra \$357) — and the company prides itself on offering first-class accommodations.

I planned to evaluate the trip, but I also wanted to take my first look at a New England fall. Would it — and the tour — meet expectations?

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I could smell the ocean before I saw it. Salt and the tangy scent of seaweed drifted



Photos by ROSEMARY MCCLURE/Los Angeles Times

Autumn's kaleidoscope of colors is mirrored in a pond on the Saco River along U.S. 302 in New Hampshire's White Mountains.

on the wind. We had left Boston around 8 a.m., driving north about 70 miles to York Beach, Maine. Clapboard houses and shops, a wide beach, a silvery sheet of sea glistening in the morning light. There were no trees in sight, but no one cared. The day was glorious.

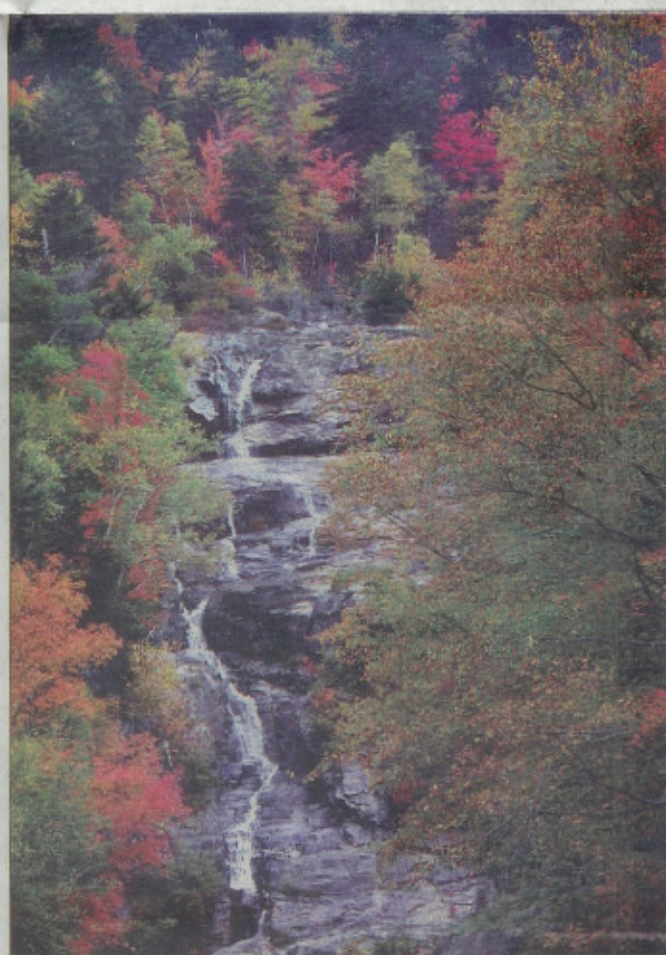
"We're going to park, so everyone can get out and take a picture," said tour guide Beverly LaFlamboy. "We're going to stop and do this extra thing."

I smiled. I've been on bus tours where there were no photo stops, regardless of the wow factor of the scenery.

The driver pulled the bus to the side of the road and many of the tour's 51 participants clambered off, cameras at the ready. My fellow travelers hailed from North America and Australia; most were over 60 and from the Midwest.

"Ten minutes," LaFlamboy shouted as we piled out, "or as long as it takes you to take a picture or two."

We were back in the bus in a flash and off to our next stop, the Nubble Lighthouse at Cape



Changing leaves provide a colorful frame for Silver Cascade, a waterfall near Crawford Notch, N.H.

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Neddick Point, one of the most photographed on the East Coast. The sun was playing tag behind clouds, and we lingered on the cliffs overlooking the lighthouse, shooting pictures.

As LaFlamboy walked nearby, I stopped her to ask a few questions about our itinerary.

According to the Trafalgar brochure, the following day we would visit Acadia National Park, near Bar Harbor, Maine, and then have leisure time to take an optional whale-watching cruise. I wanted to make sure I didn't miss the whales, I told her.

"Well, that doesn't really work," she answered. "We wish they'd change the brochure. There's not enough time for that."

My next question was about another stop we were to make later in the week, at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

"That's wrong too," she said, shaking her head. "We get there after closing. But I'll try to call ahead and ask for the gift shop to be open. People are really disappointed about that. But they can always take a picture of it from the outside."

I tried not to look dismayed.

"What else is listed in the brochure that we don't do?" I asked.

"I think those are the main two," she answered.

We arrived late that afternoon in Bar Harbor — "Bah Habah," Maine residents say — where we spent two nights at the Bar Harbor Regency, a Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort. The hotel's rooms are plain but spacious and the facility is beautifully sited, overlooking Frenchman's Bay. Our rooms were at the back of the hotel, overlooking a parking lot, a common occurrence on this tour. A Trafalgar representative said it was "by chance" that our rooms were less desirable.

Bar Harbor is another popular Maine tourist town, and we enjoyed its shops and restaurants after a half-day tour of nearby Acadia National Park. The first national park established east of the Mississippi River, it is a showplace for Maine's rugged coastline and fragrant spruce forests. I could have spent a week exploring its meandering hiking trails and bike paths. It was a trip high point.

Timing is an important element of a fall-color trip. Arrive too early and leaves still will be green; arrive too late and trees will be bare. If a sudden storm hits, all bets are off.

The seasonal beauty makes New England a popular destination. Some of our stops were spoiled by hordes of other buses: We jockeyed with tourists from five buses during a snack stop in Bath, N.H.

Some things didn't work well. Our bus driver made so many U-turns — he apparently was unsure of the route — that people started making bets on when the next one might be.

There were other transportation problems. To the uninitiated, a seat on a bus seems an unimportant thing; to those on a weeklong bus tour, it is everything. A seat in the back is to be avoided at all costs: Visibility is bad and you're always last to exit — meaning last in line for lunch, snacks or bathroom breaks.

But in the end, what was my only wish?

That I'd had a little more time to turn somersaults in a pile of autumn leaves.